

## Food Allergy Basics



- 2 to 2.5% of the U.S. population suffers from a food allergy (6 to 7 million people).
- Eight foods account for 90% of allergic reactions: peanuts, tree nuts (walnuts, pecans, etc.), fish, shellfish, eggs, milk, soy, and wheat.
- Peanuts cause the most severe allergic reactions, then shellfish, fish, tree nuts, & eggs.
- People with both asthma *and* food allergies appear to be at a higher risk for severe allergic reactions.
- Food allergy is one of the leading causes of anaphylactic (hyper-sensitive) reactions, causing an estimated 30,000 ER visits yearly.
- An estimated 100-200 people die each year from food allergy-related reactions; about 50 people die from insect sting reactions.

## Food Allergy Q & A



### **What are the common symptoms of a food-allergic reaction?**

Symptoms range from a tingling sensation in the mouth, swelling of the tongue and the throat, difficulty breathing, hives, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, drop in blood pressure, loss of consciousness, to death. Symptoms typically appear from within a few minutes to two hours after the person has eaten the allergenic food.

### **What happens in the body during a reaction?**

The immune system mistakenly believes that a harmless substance is harmful. In its attempt to protect the body, it creates specific immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibodies to that food.

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The next time the individual eats that food, the immune system releases massive amounts of chemicals and histamines in order to protect the body. These chemicals trigger a cascade of allergic symptoms that can affect the respiratory system, gastrointestinal tract, skin, or cardiovascular system.

### **What is the best treatment for food allergy?**

Strictly avoiding allergy-causing food is the only way to avoid a reaction. Reading ingredient labels of all foods is the key to avoiding food allergens. If a product doesn't have a label, allergic individuals should not eat that food. If the label contains unfamiliar terms, consumers must call the manufacturer and ask for a definition, or avoid eating that food.

### **Are food allergy & food intolerance the same?**

The terms *food allergy* and *food intolerance* do not mean the same thing. A *food allergy* occurs when the immune system reacts to a certain food. The most common form of an immune system reaction occurs when the body creates antibodies to the food.

A *food intolerance* is an adverse food-induced reaction that does not involve the immune system. Lactose intolerance is one example of a food intolerance. A person with lactose intolerance lacks an enzyme that is needed to digest milk sugar. When the person eats milk products, symptoms such as gas, bloating, and abdominal pain may occur.



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